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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a method for determining whether the language variations of Spanish-English bilingual speakers are anomalous, idiosyncratic, or truly dialectical, and reports the testing of that method. Elements of the method include presenting sentences that have grammatical/syntactic language variations, having subjects perform operational changes on the sentences (to indicate subjects' natural language usage), and eliciting subjective judgments about the sentences' compliance with grammatical rules. To test this method, 125 high school English students in a Texas-Mexico border town performed the tasks and answered questions about their language usage (exclusively English, exclusively Spanish, or combinations of English and Spanish). Although the test failed to show that any particular features of the test sentences were clearly part of a Chicano dialect, it did show that some language variations were not dialect-based, such as dropping "to" from infinitive phrases and adding "to" to participles. The paper concludes that the method can provide essential information about language variation, dialect features, and native/second language interference, and reports that modification of the instrument will be undertaken. (RL)

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Language Variability in a South Texas Bilingual Community

Sociolinguistic research in the past decade has shown that many differences in English usage formerly taken as evidence of careless speech can in fact be attributed to different but logical grammatical systems underlying various dialects. Much work has been done toward describing that dialect commonly spoken of as Black English, but relatively little research has focused on the many varieties of English spoken in the multilingual, multicultural Southwest. Now that work has begun in this area, we need more than a superficial recognition of possible dialectal interference. We need empirical evidence that those grammatical features which might be neatly explained as the consequence of language contact situations actually occur with significant frequency within the community. We need empirical evidence that the differences in the language of an individual are common to many speakers and so may legitimately be called dialect features. In brief, we need to delineate certain features of English as dialect-based and support their inclusion in a description of the dialect not merely by the fact of a single occurrence but by evidence of a broad-based acceptance and usage by many members of a speech community. For example, if an individual whose native language is Spanish occasionally drops the subject pronoun in English sentences, it is tempting to explain the omission as an instance of Spanish interference on English constructions. But does the speaker drop the pronoun because of immediate interference by Spanish on that particular sentence, or can we generalize from this example and assume

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that the actual interference occurred sometime in the past with sufficient frequency so that the speaker learned as correct a form of the English sentence without a subject pronoun? Descriptions of the Spanish-influenced English of individual speakers and writers point to potential dialect features which can often be explained by the language contact situation, but such descriptions alone are not enough. We must devise some method for determining whether such deviations are erratic, idiosyncratic, or truly dialectal.

The elicitation experiments designed by Randolph Quirk, Jan Svartik and Sidney Greenbaum (Quirk and Svartik, 1966; Greenbaum and Quirk, 1970) provide a starting point for devising such a measure. Their work has been to elicit the judgments of native English speakers about the grammaticality of certain marginally acceptable English sentences, but their technique might be usefully applied by an experimenter interested in acceptability differences based on presumed dialect variations. The test design of Quirk, et. al., includes two components. First, informants are read a number of sentences, each of which must be copied down after some specified, simple change has been made. For instance, the informants might be asked to replace the sentence-subject he by they, or to make a negative statement positive, or to change a verb from past to present tense. After all the sentences have been dictated for the operation component, the sentences are again read and the informants are asked to decide whether they find the sentences "natural and normal," "unnatural or abnormal," or "intermediate between these two extremes." (Quirk and Svartik, 1966:20) The hypothesis behind the dictation-plus-operation component is that the changes to be made in the sentences shift the attention of the informants away from the features in question, that is,

away from such features as the substitution of the nominative who for objective whom in the question "Who did you see?" Because their attention has been directed away from the feature, informants are more likely to copy the sentence as they would say it naturally, so that a speaker for whom this sentence was ungrammatical would copy the sentence with the assigned change from past to present tense as "Whom do you see?" In the second component, in which the informants' judgments of acceptability are recorded, there is no corresponding shift in attention. If the feature in question is not natural to that speaker's language, then his judging the question "Who did you see?" as ungrammatical should reflect this.

Quirk, Svartik and Greenbaum are primarily interested in determining native speaker reactions to adverb placement and certain lexical anomalies. To apply their technique to acceptability judgments on potential dialect items of Chicano English, we may simply substitute test sentences which contain examples of the features being investigated. In designing such a test, I used sentences taken from compositions written by forty-eight Chicano students for freshmen English classes at Pan American University in Edinburg, Texas, a city in the southern tip of the state, located about fifteen miles from the Mexican border.[1] Though the grammatical structures to be tested were essentially unchanged from those sentences in the compositions, many test sentences were modified so as to make them a practical length for dictation. For instance, the sentence "The employer fears he is not capable to handle the type of job he is assigned to," drawn from the Pan American compositions, was shortened in the test to read "I was not capable to handle the job I was assigned to."

The sentences selected included some lexically-based deviations involving items like preposition or relative pronoun choice, but I was principally

interested in eliciting responses to variations within the auxiliary verb system and responses to variations in the methods of embedding a clause in noun phrase position. In the Pan American compositions there were several instances of verbs conjugated for past perfect when the ordinary conjugation would call for simple past tense, as is the case with the verb _like_ in the sentence "She came over to see it and she had liked it quite a bit." In Spanish, the same expression would be conjugated with the imperfective _gustaba_, a verb form which has no exact equivalent in English but which is ordinarily translated as _was liking_ or _used to like_. The simple past tense which the English sentence calls for usually corresponds to the Spanish preterit form. Because this sentence and others of its type do not conform to the standard correspondence patterns between the English and Spanish verb systems, there is a possibility that some imperfective verb forms in Spanish translate more naturally into English past or present perfect. Sentences of this type were included in the test to determine if, in fact, speakers of Spanish-influenced English regularly used or accepted such forms.

The Pan American compositions also included several instances of variations in the methods used for embedding a clause in noun phrase position. The class of the verb of the matrix sentence determines the restrictions on the type of complementizer used to embed the clause, that is, whether the clause takes the surface form of an infinitive phrase, a gerund phrase, or a full noun clause. The restrictions for a single verb are often complex, and, in many cases, run exactly counter to the restrictions imposed by the corresponding verb in Spanish. For instance, _believe_ belongs to that class of English verbs which will take an infinitive object complement only in cases where the subject of the embedded clause has been raised to object position, "I believe you to be honest," or it will take a clausal complement, "I believe that I

will never forget," but it cannot take an infinitive complement in which the subject of the embedded clause has been deleted, "I believe never to forget." The writer of the sentence "It was a very interesting and exciting experience which I believe never to forget" may have followed the restrictions on the Spanish verb creer, which takes an infinitive complement when the embedded clause has had the subject deleted and takes the clausal complement in other cases. Since the verbal restrictions are often complicated and must simple be memorized for each verb, and since the restricti ons in Spanish frequently contrast, we might predict Spanish-influenced dialect differences in clausal complements in noun phrase positions.

The experiment consisted of thirty-five sentences divided into six groups according to the operation to be performed. For each group of sentences, the students were first given instructions on the change they were to make in that group and an example of the operation. The instructions and examples were both read aloud and printed on the answer sheets supplied. (See Appendix for a sample of the test sentences and instructions.) Similarly the instructions for the second component, that of judgment, were read aloud and printed on the answer sheet. Of the thirty-five sentences, several of unquestionable grammaticality were included to serve as a control and to prevent having the test consist entirely of irregular sentences.

A sample test sentence which includes a feature potentially dialect-based is the following: "I thought Bob had a degree on engineering," where the use of the preposition on contrasts with the Standard English usage in and might be explained as interference from the Spanish preposition en which can be translated as either in or on. The hypothesis is that if in actual speech such a substitution is common enough to be considered a dialect feature, then a significant number of informants, once they have completed

the assigned task of changing the verb from past to present tense, will record the sentence as "I think Bob has a degree on engineering," keeping the preposition on. Similarly, a significant number of informants should mark the sentence as grammatical in the judgment component. If, however, an informant would not use on in this context, in performing the operation that informant may change the sentence to read "I think Bob has a degree in engineering," substituting the preposition in. Without the shift in attention caused by the operation in the first component, this informant will probably become conscious of the irregular preposition when the sentence is reread during the judgment component, and consequently will mark it ungrammatical. The third possibility is that the informant is conscious of the irregularity during the operation test but nonetheless copies it exactly as dictated. This last informant, like the second, would also mark the sentence ungrammatical during the judgment component. The first type of response suggests that the feature is part of a system of grammar for a Spanish-influenced dialect of English. Significant numbers of the second and third types of responses would suggest that it is not.

The experimental design was tested by using the responses of 125 students in five high school senior English classes in a border town near Edinburg. In one of the five classes, the experiment was modified to eliminate the operation to be performed, so that the first component consisted simply of the students' copying the dictated sentence. The purpose of this modification was to determine whether or not the task of carrying out some change, in addition to recording the dictated sentence, was so difficult as to affect the results. If the students had difficulty in remembering and recording the sentences, they might change a number of the sentences not because the structure was unacceptable but because they simply couldn't remember all of the

sentence after only one reading. Such changes would significantly affect the data if interpreted as having been changed to correct unacceptable sentences. The results seem to indicate that reading the sentences at thirty-second intervals allows sufficient time for the students to record the sentence, either without performing a task as in the modified version, or with a task, as in the original test design.

The responses in the operation component were next coded as compliance, relevant non-compliance, and peripheral non-compliance or failure. Though Quirk, et. al., (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1970:19-20) define compliance quite strictly as succesful performance of the operation along with exact recording of the sentence as dictated, I define compliance more loosely to include all those responses in which the informant preserved as dictated the feature in question, regardless of his or her compliance or failure in the rest of the sentence or operation.[2] Responses coded as relevant non-compliance included any one in which the informant had in some way changed the structure of the feature being investigated so as to bring it more in line with the Standard English norm. And finally, a code of peripheral non-compliance or failure was assigned to those sentences in which the informant had significantly altered the entire sentence structure or had completely omitted the sentence.

Following the judgment component of the experiment the students answered several questions regarding language usage. Given the choice of selecting English, Spanish, or mixed English and Spanish, the students were asked to identify the languages they used most in talking with their grandparents, with their parents and with their friends. Then they were asked to identify the language in which they felt they could express themselves most clearly, again given the three choices. On the basis of the version of the test taken and their responses to these questions regarding language habits,

the students were grouped. The twenty-five students in the class given the modified test without the operation remained in one group, regardless of language habits. Those students given the original version with the dictation-plus-operation component were regrouped so as to separate out comparable groups at either end of the language continuum. There were thirty students who indicated that they used English in all contexts and who felt that they expressed themselves most clearly in English. And there were thirty-six students who either indicated Spanish or mixed English and Spanish as their preferred language, or who, despite their claim of English as preferred language, indicated that they used Spanish or mixed English and Spanish in all three contexts. Such a grouping should delineate those students with exclusively English backgrounds least likely to have features of a Spanish-influenced English dialect and those students with predominantly Spanish background most likely to have such a dialect.

A comparison of the number of relevant non-compliance responses made in the modified version with those made in the original version supports the hypothesis that the addition of an operation to the task, by misdirecting the informants' attention, will tend to elicit more natural sentences. With few exceptions, the number of relevant non-compliances in the group given the simplified test was significantly lower, indicating that the students are able to hear and record the deviation though they may later judge it ungrammatical. Of the total possible responses on the twenty-eight sentences with questionable features, the group taking the modified version had 36.9 percent responses coded as relevant non-compliance; the combined English and Spanish groups taking the original test design had 62.5 percent of total possible responses coded relevant non-compliance. Those few exceptions in which the percentage of relevant non-compliances from the

group taking the modified version was fairly close to that in the other set can be attributed to a phonetic intrusion such that most informants actually do not hear the deviation in either reading of the sentence. For instance, an impressive majority of the informants, in recording the statement "Attitudes can be changed once they been tried" (See Appendix, number 11), inserted a contracted auxiliary have, "Attitudes can be changed once they've been tried" (or the corresponding negative sentence for those performing the operation). The high number of acceptances on the judgment component, which might seem to contradict the changes made in the operation section, actually indicates that even in the second reading of the sentence many students believe they are hearing the perfective auxiliary. Clearly its omission is not a dialect feature. Similarly, in recording sentence 14, "It is very hard to get use to changing gears," and sentence 15, "In many schools, Spanish is not emphasize as much as English is," students inserted the missing past participle affix, which again was probably not phonetically distinct in the judgment test, hence the high number of acceptances.

A different type of phonetic interference may well explain the high number of relevant non-compliances in the tenth sentence, "This organizations work to educate the people," with its correspondingly high number of acceptances by the Spanish group in the judgment component. The English group made similar changes in the sentence during the operation test to bring it in line with the Standard English usage, but most students in this group judged the sentence as ungrammatical on the second reading. Eighty-one percent of the Spanish group judged the sentence as acceptable, as opposed to only twenty percent of the English group. The explanation may well be that because of the minimal phonetic contrast typically made between this and these by Spanish speakers (and not because of any failure to distinguish

singular and plural), only those in the Spanish group believed that they were hearing the plural demonstrative on both readings.

Generally, the number of relevant non-compliance responses made by the English group was slightly higher than the number made by the Spanish group (total responses coded relevant non-compliance by English group, 67.7 percent; total by Spanish group, 58.0 percent), while the number of judgments of grammaticality in the Spanish group slightly exceeded those in the English (in the Spanish group, total judgments of grammaticality--49.9 percent; in the English group--43.8 percent). In cases where the percentages for each group were considerably divergent, the feature may be considered potentially dialect-based, potentially because no feature came through as overwhelmingly accepted with minimal responses altering the construction in the operation component. Perhaps the most likely candidate for dialect adoption is the added preposition in sentence 19, "He remembered of the diamond ring yesterday." Only 27.8 percent of the Spanish group dropped the preposition in changing the statement to a question as the task required, while 60 percent of the English group did; 44.4 percent of the Spanish group judged the sentence grammatical while only 16.6 percent of the English group did.

Several of the sentences containing irregular clausal complement constructions earned high acceptance scores by the Spanish group and relatively lower acceptance scores by the English group, but all had correspondingly higher numbers of responses which altered the construction when performing the operation than did sentence 19.. Sentences typical of this are sentence 3, "I was not capable to handle the job I was assigned to" (relevant non-compliance: 61.1 percent in the Spanish group, 66.6 percent in the English group; acceptance judgments: 41.8 percent in the Spanish group, 40.0 percent in the English group), sentence 29, "Better pay made the employees to work

harder" (relevant non-compliance: Spanish--58.3 percent, English--86.7 percent; acceptance judgments: Spanish--52.8 percent, English 30.0 percent), and sentence 34, "They should make the students to listen carefully" (Relevant non-compliance: Spanish--58.3 percent, English--70.0 percent; acceptance judgment: Spanish--36.1 percent, English--0 percent). Here the high level of acceptance on some sentences may, rather than pointing to a dialect feature, simply reflect a hesitation on the part of these high school students to judge a borderline sentence as really ungrammatical or even questionable. The complexity of verbal restrictions on clausal complements often makes a judgment difficult even for those of us trained in the teaching of the language. The heavy percentage of questionable judgments on sentence 12, "The rice requires to be watched very often," supports such an explanation. Of the sixty-six students in the two groups, twelve judged this sentence of questionable grammaticality; no more than nine did on any other sentence.

Those students in the Spanish group showed perhaps a greater amount of a similar indecision in making judgments on the control sentences. Here there were few exceptions to the acceptances on the part of students in the English group, but on some control sentences as many as seven or eight students in the Spanish group judged the sentences as unacceptable or questionable. For the thirty-five sentences, the Spanish group had a total of 10.8 percent judgments of questionable grammaticality, the English group only 7.0 percent. The test was not designed to elicit language attitudes, so these results could hardly be taken as conclusive evidence, but the higher number of judgments of questionable grammaticality might suggest less assurance about language "correctness" on the part of the Spanish bilinguals, a reluctance to make absolute judgments about right and wrong usage.

Though the test failed to show overwhelming support for any one feature as being clearly part of Chicano English, there were several features which

were overwhelmingly shown not to be dialect-based, despite the fact that such structures had occurred in the writing of the Pan American students. For instance, given an individual occurrence of the sentence "I find it very easy identify with Joe" (sentence 18), we might suppose that the infinitive marker to was missing because Spanish verbs are marked for the infinitive by a verb suffix rather than a separate lexical item. Such is not the case, for in the experiment 61.1 percent of the Spanish and 93.3 percent of the English group responded with relevant non-compliance, while only 5.6 percent of the Spanish and 13.3 percent of the English group judged the sentence grammatical. Similar figures indicate that other features are definitely not dialect-based: sentence 30, "They just started to sneezing their heads off" (relevant non-compliance: Spanish--75.0 percent, English--86.7 percent; acceptance judgments: Spanish--5.6 percent, English 3.3 percent); sentence 31, "We didn't want the cat might have deformed kittens" (relevant non-compliance: Spanish--77.8 percent, English--80.0 percent; Acceptance judgments: Spanish--8.3 percent, English--10.0 percent); and sentence 35, "Yesterday we walked into downtown and saw some friends" (relevant non-compliance: Spanish--61.1 percent, English--56.6 percent; acceptance judgments: Spanish--22.2 percent, English 13.3 percent).

In spite of the fact that the pilot experiment did not provide landslide evidence for any dialect feature,[3] I believe it proved the usefulness of such a tool for dialect descriptions. There are several aspects of the test which need revision before it is administered again. Sentence 17, "Hurricane Beulah is a storm which I believe never to forget," apparently contains too many embedded clauses, for numerous students were simply unable to record it correctly in the dictation component. Many instances of avoidable phonetic intrusions have weakened the validity of the data. The consonant cluster across word boundaries in sentence 23 "The cook should filled the pan about

half full" made it virtually impossible for me to pronounce the inappropriate tense marker on fill without a conspicuous pause in the reading. In sentence 14, "It is very hard to get use to changing gears," the dental stop following use probably was heard as a past participle affix in both components despite my attempt to pronounce the verb without the affix. The distinction between in and on in sentence 20, "He was very strong from work on the fields" was unnecessarily slight, as both would reduce to a centralized vowel in this unstressed position. In this case, it would be useful to match the operation responses of individual students with their judgments to determine whether those same students who recorded the sentence with in also judged the sentence grammatical, a correspondence which would suggest that they hear the preposition in for both readings. In other instances a matching of the individual's operation response and judgment could provide further information on his ultimate acceptance or rejection of the feature. Finally, the very rough coding of compliance, relevant non-compliance, and peripheral non-compliance on the operation component should be expanded to include finer distinctions since many instances of omitted sentences or erasures coded as peripheral might in fact be evidence of the students' hesitation caused by what strikes them as a very peculiar sentence.

Since no one feature proved to be an unequivocal dialect feature, my next step is to collect some more data to use in the experiment for a second try. I am convinced that this type of experiment is useful in identifying dialect features, an identification which can give linguists new insights on language contact situations and which can provide educators essential information for dealing with language differences among students.

APPENDIX

General Instructions:

Your answer sheet gives you instructions on various changes to make to a sentence, changes like making a question of a statement, converting a verb from present to past tense, a subject from singular to plural, and so on. Listen very carefully as I read each sentence, but do not begin writing until I have finished reading the sentence completely. Then copy the sentence down, making the necessary change that is specified on the answer sheet. The sentences will be read at timed intervals, so you must write quickly, but carefully.

Questions at this point?

Specific Instructions (sample):

For the first group of sentences, you are to change the singular subjects to plural subjects. For example, the sentence, "He is going to buy his friend a new shirt," should be changed to "They are going to buy their friend a new shirt."

Sentence	Spanish Operation* 1	2	3	Spanish Judgment# -1	2	3	English Operation 1	2	3	English Judgment 1	2	3	Version 2 Operation 1	2	3	Total Group Judgment 1	2	3
1. He doesn't know what her name is.				31	5					30						109	13	3
2. I asked her to leave her shoes at the door.				33	1	2				28	1	1				113	8	4
3. He had plenty time there for lunch and relaxation.	10	22	4	15	15	6	9	20	1	12	16	2	14	11		52	59	14
4. I was not capable to handle the job I was assigned to.	12	19	5	31	3	2	7	22	1	17	11	2	17	7		80	30	5
5. At that same moment, he thought he had heard some noises.	25	8	3	26	7	3	12	14	4	22	6	2	23	2		97	20	8
6. She needs the pan where she boils water for coffee.	24	9	3	21	12	3	23	5	2	11	16	3	20	2	3	67	44	14
7. She had been nowhere in sight when we stopped.	19	11	6	20	11	5	21	5	4	23	5	2	25			79	35	10
8. The car he was driving broke down on the highway.				35		1				28	2					116	7	2
9. The weather suits for the type of crops that the Farmers plant.	12	17	7	13	17	6	4	21	5	9	19	2	20	4	1	40	65	20
10. This organizations work to educate the people.	6	26	4	29	5	2		25	5	6	22	2	5	20		68	48	9
11. Attitudes can be changed once they been tried.	3	30	3	24	7	5	1	24	5	22	7	1	1	22	2	86	23	16
12. The rice requires to be watched very often.	23	7	6	18	11	7	19	9	2	11	14	5	22	1	2	66	40	19
13. Mike's illness caused for him to miss a week of school.	1	30	5	22	14		1	28	1	16	13	1	11	12	2	70	48	7
14. It is very hard to get use to changing gears.	5	23	8	26	6	4	5	21	4	25	3	2	9	14	2	93	16	15
15. In many schools, Spanish is not emphasize as much as English is.	7	21	8	30	4	2	1	23	6	25	5		4	20	1	107	15	3
16. The man in my math class is in the Air Force.				28	7	1				27	3					107	16	2

* Compliance, Relevant Non-Compliance, Peripheral Non-Compliance. Sentences unmarked are control.

\# Grammatical, Ungrammatical, Questionable

	Sentence	Spanish Operation 1	2	3	Spanish Judgment 1	2	3	English Operation 1	2	3	English Judgment 1	2	3	Version 2 Operation 1	2	3	Total Group Judgment 1	2	3
17.	Hurricane Beulah is a storm which I believe never to forget.	3	26	7	8	22	6	9	14	7	6	21	3	12	10	3	28	82	14
18.	I find it very easy identify with Joe.	1	22	13	2	29	5	1	28	1	4	25	1	9	16		9	105	11
19.	He remembered of the diamond ring yesterday.	26	10		16	16	4	11	18	1	5	22	3	23	2		38	71	16
20.	He was very strong from work on the fields.	13	20	3	13	22	1	12	17	1	16	10	4	19	6		47	62	16
21.	She laughed when she heard him singing in the bathtub.				32	4					29	1					118	16	
22.	It was better if his father just wouldn't find out.	14	19	3	15	15	6	4	24	2	13	14	3	22	2	1	61	51	13
23.	The cook should filled the pan about half full.	1	32	3	23	9	4		27	3	27	2	1	1	24		92	22	11
24.	Sue had lied to her boss that she was sick.	25	9	2	21	12	3	14	14	2	14	13	3	25			67	45	13
25.	Low grades were the cause of students to drop out.	5	24	7	26	7	3	3	26	1	24	5	1	13	12		91	26	8
26.	Jane hopes that all her dreams would become reality.	2	24	10	23	12	1	2	22	6	14	12	4	11	14		67	47	11
27.	I thought Bob had a degree on engineering.	8	22	6	26	9	1	6	20	4	7	23		17	8		61	62	2
28.	The members of the jury believed the girl's statement.				29	3	4				30						113	6	6
29.	Better pay made the employees to work harder.	11	21	4	19	16	1	2	26	2	9	17	4	18	6	1	54	61	10
30.	They just started to sneezing their heads off.	8	27	1	2	30	4	4	26		1	29		21	3	1	7	110	7
31.	We didn't want the cat might have deformed kittens.	3	28	5	3	31	2	3	24	3	3	26	1	15	9	1	7	110	7
32.	The children talked to their mother on the phone.				34	2					27	2	1				117	5	3
33.	They got upset if the children did not learned a new song.		35	1	10	24	2		28	2	2	26	2	2	22	1	26	89	9
34.	They should make the students to listen carefully.	14	21	1	13	18	5	7	21	2		29	1	19	5	1	21	89	14
35.	Yesterday we walked into downtown and saw some friends.	14	22		8	26	2	12	17	1	4	24	2	21	4		24	92	8

NOTES

[1] I presented details of this earlier study in a paper delivered at the 27th Annual Meeting of the College Conference on Composition and Communication in Philadelphia, March 26, 1976.

[2] Such a broad measure may actually be misleading. It is possible that an informant could record the sentence maintaining the feature in question but fail in some other aspect of the operation simply because the ungrammatical feature confused him.

[3] A possible explanation for the fact that no single feature appeared to be clearly a dialect feature is that dialect features are variable even in the speech of an individual.

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